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INVITED COMMENT ON THE THEME OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Social media: back to the roots and back to the future

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a viewpoint on the historical roots and future evolution of social media.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper provides a summary of the authors' previous research and experience in the area of social media.

Findings – This paper contains practical insights on the consumer use and business potential of social media applications.

Originality/value – This viewpoint provides insights to anyone who is interested in researching consumer use of social media or using social media in a managerial context. It will be particularly helpful to business leaders who are looking for answers in the fast-moving area of social media applications.

Keywords Social media, Internet, Information exchange, Information, Information management

Paper type Viewpoint

Social media, defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), have changed the life of individuals and corporations alike (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010). Roughly a decade ago, when Wikipedia was founded in 2001, the number of people who believed in the concept was only small and only few could imagine it to become a success story. Today Wikipedia counts 20 million articles and 400 million unique visitors per month, which makes it, *de facto*, the key information provider on the internet. But social media is much broader than simply collaborative projects such as Wikipedia and also includes blogs and micro-blogs (e.g. Twitter), content communities (e.g. YouTube), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life). Table I for a classification of the different applications usually summarized under this term.

The fact that social media have become such an essential part of our everyday lives is certainly impressive but then again not that surprising. A brief look behind the curtains shows that the "social media revolution", that everybody is talking about these days, is, in its essence, nothing else than the internet going back to its roots. In its early days the internet started as a collection of newsgroups where individuals could read or post bulletin board-like messages in categories as geeky as "high tech" and "science fiction". The most popular newsgroups system Usenet was developed in 1979 and publicly established in 1980 by Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis, two graduate students from Duke University. Soon these newsgroups developed into real discussion platforms

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which allowed individuals to exchange user-generated content with each other – not much different than the discussion forums present on the world wide web today, which have become such an important source of consumer information (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). In the same period, 1979/1980, Multi-User Dungeon, the first internet-based massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), was developed by the two Essex students Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle. This first of a kind MMORPG can be seen as a direct forerunner of virtual game worlds such as World of Warcraft.

This first era, where the internet belonged to individual people, was quickly followed by a time in which corporations took over the power in the virtual sphere and even tried to manipulate consumer discussions on forums (Dellarocas, 2006). Corporate web pages and e-commerce pushed individual activities to the margin with industry giants such as Amazon and eBay arriving in 1995 and providing a new type of value proposition to consumers (Keeney, 1999). Adding an internet-channel was considered by many firms and stock market analysts as a smart and value-creating move (Geyskens *et al.*, 2002). However, many of these corporations got a ticking-off only six years later when the dot-com bubble burst in 2001.The same year, Wikipedia started on January 15 with the simple sentence: "Hello world. Humor me. Go there and add a little article. It will take all of five or ten minutes." Interestingly, only few people know that Wikipedia was born as a complementary project to an intensively peer-reviewed platform called Nupedia where only selected individuals holding a PhD in the respective area could write articles. And while Nupedia's policy of limiting user-generated content failed tremendously with only 24 articles published after three years of existence, Wikipedia which gave complete power to all users, turned into a huge success.

Today's "social media revolution" can therefore be seen as an evolution back to the roots, since it re-transforms the internet to what it was initially created for – a platform to facilitate information exchange between its users. Does this historical U-turn mean that social media are nothing more than old wine in new bottles? Not really. Instead of looking at social media as going "back to the roots" one could also describe the current trend as traveling "back to the future". Today, so many consumers are tweeting (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011a) and so many companies applying viral marketing techniques (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011b) that this often tricks us into believing that all has already been said about social media. Yet, there are still some areas that might be more than futuristic to many of us. Two examples of this are virtual social worlds, such as Second Life or Active Worlds, and mobile social media applications, such as Facebook Places or Foursquare.

Virtual social worlds (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009b) created a lot of hype in 2006 and 2007. During this period, no day passed without at least one article appearing in the press that proclaimed virtual social worlds to become "the next big thing". Since then it has

	Social presence/media richness		
	Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation/self-disclosure			
High	Blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter)	Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life)
Low	Collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g. YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft)

Source: Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)

Table I.
Classification of social media

become rather quiet around these 3D virtual environments as initial expectations were not fulfilled, although as a consequence of this trend several firms have added avatars (Holzwarth *et al.*, 2006) and virtual employees (Koehler *et al.*, 2011) on their corporate web pages. However, virtual social worlds are far from being dead and it is likely that we all will get the impression to be thrown "back to the future" in a couple of years from today. Next to diversion, building of personal relationships, learning, as well as earning money, are key motivations to spend time on virtual social worlds (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009a). Most importantly, however, virtual social worlds are not considered as a game by the users actively involved in them, but as an extension of their real lives. Borders between the real and virtual smoothly disappear. This might seem futuristic to some of us – but much less so to the 10,000 of teenagers who regularly are exposed to these kinds of virtual environments. The music channel MTV, for example, offers a collection of virtual worlds called "Virtual MTV" where addicts of this iconic TV channel can meet with each other, make friends, or exchange opinions about their favorite shows.

In a similar spirit the advent of mobile social media (Kaplan, 2012), i.e. social media accessed via a mobile device, already make computer-based social media look like a gramophone in comparison to an mp3-player. Especially the opportunities of geolocalisation and increased time sensitivity offered by mobile devices will play an important role. For starters, mobile social media are even more closely tied to how people engage in the real world than traditional social media. With mobile social media one not only knows the "status" of friends and acquaintances, but additionally where they are currently located – which opens the possibility (what a crazy thought) to actually go and see them in real life. Also, location-based services provide room for a second and maybe even scarier development: the potential information over-sharing. PleaseRobMe.com, a web site aggregating Foursquare check-ins and identifying a user's home address as well as current location via an algorithm, illustrates this danger. Once home and current location are far enough apart, the user is listed prime candidate for robbery. More futuristic, but not impossible, might be the following: facial recognition could make it possible to take somebody's picture in the street and compare it to social networking sites. A match could provide the name and other information about this person. Applications like Google Goggles show that this might not be so futuristic after all.

Current trends in social media embody two different directions. On the one hand, social media go "back to the roots" of the internet's beginnings, a world that was ruled by individuals instead of big corporations. On the other hand, they go "back to the future" by exploring new and futuristic phenomena such as the amalgam of virtual and real but also the consumers' (over-) sharing of information with all its opportunities and threats. One can be curious, impatient, maybe even worried where the social media adventure will carry consumers as well as corporations in the next couple of years. One thing, however, is clear: social media offer an unprecedented opportunity for researchers to analyze and decrypt new types of data, to communicate and interact with consumers, and to help organizations to be prepared for this new era of internet and mobile applications.

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